

By Dan Murphy
Illustration by Wesley Allsbrook

A Letter to a Young Doctor



SO YOU WANT A CAREER IN medicine. You've got a lot of options, including all the specialties, primary care, research, and teaching. You're weighing many factors, such as salary and job security.

But by far your most important challenge will be finding work that will capture your heart. Satisfaction comes out of a sense of accomplishment, a camaraderie, a legacy of knowing that you contributed to something greater than yourself.

You need to find a passion, a cause you can commit to. We physicians are humans. We see, we feel, we strive to understand. We pledge ourselves to alleviate suffering and sickness. So we should also address the social, cultural, and political causes of our epidemic ill health.

You need not just a practice, but a calling. And you might find it far away from the cushy confines of a medical group in the United States.

I have found my calling in a setting half way around the world: East Timor. Exciting and challenging work is nothing new for me. I spent seven years with César Chávez in the grape fields of California, and for three years, I served as a district medical officer in newly independent Mozambique, where I was the only physician for 200,000 people in what was then the poorest country on Earth.

Dan Murphy is the director of the Bairo Pite Clinic in East Timor.

Fifteen years ago, as I searched the world for meaningful commitment, General Suharto, the thirty-year dictator of Indonesia, fell from power. Black bag in hand, I left Cedar Falls, Iowa, and headed for Dili, East Timor.

The people of East Timor were oppressed by Portuguese colonialism for 500 years, and then, in 1975, when they declared their independence, Suharto and the Indonesian military trampled on them. But by the late 1990s, the people of East Timor were again asserting their independence, and I lent myself to their cause. I had a two-year stint as a one-man M.A.S.H. unit, clandestine partisan supporter, and willing media spokesman. I was able to participate

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But maximize
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meaningfully in an impossible crusade for freedom. East Timor won formal independence following a U.N. referendum in 1999. Reluctantly, Indonesia exited, but not before burning and destroying 50 percent of all existing structures.

I opened Bairo Pite Clinic on the ashes of this calamity, and I've been serving there ever since.

My typical day begins with morning rounds attended by a mixture of foreign and Timorese medical personnel. We now are delivering 100 or more babies a month in our maternity ward, and village women are choosing lay midwives for training in our clinic. Fifty in-patient beds are filled with patients suffering from every variety of disease, both tropical and Western. The final ward is for malnourished children, as half of

Timorese children are stunted. We have out-patient consults with 300 to 400 people per day.

The clinic is free, and I am free to concentrate all my energy on being a physician trying to diagnose and treat the never-ending flow of gracious patients coming from all reaches of the country. My gratification comes from having the privilege of looking directly into the eyes of someone with otherwise no possibility of

receiving health care and using all my education, experience, and determination to be of assistance.

I can put in long hours and still feel energized. It is fulfilling work. It is what I should be doing.

I'm not saying you need to come to East Timor. But I urge you to look beyond the narrow horizons and search out a practice and a calling that can have the most impact on people's lives—including your own. ♦

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